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CONCERNING SCANSION

Within the last few years the study of prosody has awakened among educators more general interest than it has received at almost any other time since the mechanical side of poetry first became the object of academic attention. In many instances, however, this revival of interest has been accompanied by a feeling of intense dissatisfaction, for not infrequently the rules laid down by grammarians and rhetoricians are felt to be totally inadequate to the explanation of the phenomena encountered. Oftener still, they are found to be entirely at variance with what the student believes to be true, nor can they by any possible means be made to accord with common sense.

The amount of energy expended in searching among Latin and Greek authors in order to obtain the exact views of their most brilliant minds on this subject is out of all proportion to the modicum of information that has been extracted from the rubbish, and to the contributions made toward the solving of our problems. Important as it is for us to know what the Hellenes and Latins thought upon any subject, we should be careful, especially in scientific work, not to pin our faith too closely to their judgment.

Now, since research has in this instance been productive of such meagre results, would it not be well to resort to the scientific method and, turning our attention to the verse itself, try to discover what its structure really is? Approaching the subject in this way, we should reasonably expect to arrive at a more accurate knowledge of the structure of verse than the ancients, by their less scientific methods, could possibly have attained. Where we can verify their statements, we thus make surety double sure; where we may differ, there need be no attempt to harmonize our views with theirs. When we shall have examined for ourselves, we should feel no hesitation in stating what we know to be true.

Helmholz's monumental work on acoustics and the series of experiments performed by Mr. Louis Bevier furnish sufficient data to prove conclusively that music and verse are, from the

standpoint of the physicist, very closely related. Wherein this relation exists, I tried to show by a paper, "On Tonality in English Verse," published in *The Sewanee Review*, October, 1909. It does not seem amiss to restate here, however, that, while music and verse are in many instances closely allied, the only place in which they actually interlap is in the matter of rhythm. Rhythm is the recurrence of identity at regular intervals. In both music and verse this recurrence is one of accent. It is usually designated as primary rhythm. In addition, both possess a secondary rhythm, which arises from the fact that after each logical group there comes a pause. When the logical grouping is absolutely regular, as in lyric verse, the secondary rhythm is far more prominent than the primary. In verse, the syllables bear to one another and to the pauses time relations exactly similar to those which in music are sustained between the tones themselves and the rests. The time value given to any syllable, however, is relative, logical, psychological, and physiological conditions combining to determine both its value and the amount of stress which it is to receive; but the time value of any syllable must always maintain a simple ratio between itself and the time values of the syllables which precede and follow it. In this respect, as far as we have been able to determine up to the present time, music and verse are identical, although the rhythms of modern music are often exceedingly complex, while those of verse are comparatively simple. The difficulties attending the pronunciation of complicated rhythms have compelled those of verse to remain plain and primal (the rhythms of Homer are the rhythms of to-day), while, on the other hand, the use of instruments for musical expression has so facilitated execution that the genius of the musician has been left unhampered in its invention of rhythms. Such exceedingly ornate rhythmical patterns have resulted that, to-day, music and verse are further apart than they have been during any other period of their development. Yet, where they are alike, the similarity is so marked that much light may be focused upon verse by holding it in juxtaposition to music and comparing the two.

The birth of music was coeval with that of verse. In fact, they were so intimately associated that it now seems an error to

speaking of ancient music as distinct from verse. Music was half chanted, half recited verse, and verse did not exist at all except as rendered musically. When they were finally separated, ethereal music languished, while verse, the more robust of the two, took firm root and blossomed luxuriantly. The rearing of the exotic, music, was left to the work of our own age, to become a distinctly modern product. Music, as we think of it, did not exist among the Greeks nor among the Romans, both the music and the verse of the latter being importations from their more highly artistic, Hellenic neighbors. There is no authentic record of a single Greek song. Of course, we have the words; but, since the Greeks possessed no system of notation with which to record it, the music has in no instance been found. At a very late period they did begin to employ a crude set of mnemonics by adopting a line and arranging above and below this a few dots that gave no idea whatever as to how much or how little the voice should be raised or lowered. So indefinite was their sense of pitch that these dots answered every purpose. As little as is known about Greek music, research has now made it tolerably certain that Greek song never reached the stage of development attained in the plantation melodies as we hear them sung by the negro to-day; that the Greeks possessed but slight idea of pitch, and that they had no notion whatever of harmony; that they did, however, have a keen sense of rhythm, the rhythm of the spoken word, the rhythm of the dance. Strange as it may seem, they made no attempt to indicate the rhythm of their songs. Evidently, the words themselves supplied all that they cared to know, just as we do not find it necessary to label verse "iambic pentameter," or what not, in order to read it rhythmically.

The history of music does not begin until 599 A.D., when Pope Gregory, in adapting music to the uses of the church, discarded that abomination to the modern ear, the Greek tetrachord, and substituted in its place a crude but logical scale. With this established, he soon worked out the system of notation upon which our modern method is based.

Although in their musical notation they paid no attention to rhythm, the Greeks, from their study of verse, had, long before

the time of Gregory, realized that both music and verse were primarily concerned with rhythm. This is clearly shown in their method of scansion; for the use of feet means consciousness of repetition; and repetition at regular intervals means rhythm.

Language has already made great strides and is tending toward crystallization when a people finds it necessary to invent a system of signs with which to record their thoughts. These signs are invariably crude, and centuries must elapse between the date of their adoption and the time when they really begin to be either accurate or flexible.

Now the purpose of this resumé of the history of music is to fix the attention upon two things: (1) That, although the Greeks had attained a high degree of culture, although their verse had been wellnigh perfected before scansion was first employed, and although this method for showing verse structure was much more exact than either their alphabet or the system of notation then in use, in spite of this their method of scansion must of necessity have been imperfect; (2) that, in order to see just where we stand to-day, we must take into consideration the fact that, while the alphabet and musical notation have made steady progress, scansion in the hands of the schoolmen has remained almost absolutely rigid and dormant, their reverence for classic beauty forbidding innovation and blinding them to the imperfections of the system under which the classic poets wrote.

Sidney Lanier was on firm ground when he suggested the use of musical notation to take the place of the classical method of scansion. By notation we are able to express accurately every rhythmical scheme that has yet been invented; while by the old method, many of the most beautiful rhythms are presented to us as a hopeless jumble. Now, the one object of this paper is to show how a clearer comprehension of English verse may be gained from the musical method of scansion than from the classical, and to recommend that the musical method be used entirely independent of the classical method and without trying to make it conform to the rules so long in use.

Lanier was a pioneer and it ought not to be expected that the trail which he blazed should run either as straight or as smoothly

as a turnpike. We must admit that he made mistakes; although at the time of their perpetration, these very errors made his method seem all the more plausible, for they were all the result of trying to conform to the classical method. Two of these call for discussion here: (1) His idea of the time value of the foot and how the various feet should be written; (2) his conception of metre as a vital part of verse.

Lanier conceived the idea that all English verse since a very early period has been written in triple time. In iambic and trochaic feet he says that the stressed syllable occupies two beats; the unstressed, one. In the dactyl and the anapest the syllables are of equal value theoretically, but in practice the stressed syllable steals a fraction of the time of the syllable following it, just as is done in waltz music. Both these statements are true in a great many cases, but they are not true in all cases. If stressing lengthens the stressed syllable in the dactyl and the anapest, it likewise lengthens the same syllable in the iambus and the trochee. It does happen in nine cases out of ten that stressed syllables infringe upon the time value of the following beat, whether the time be common or triple. By considering all verse as written in triple time, we lose sight of a most important fact that is best brought to our attention by an illustration. Select at random a dozen hymns of any metre you please (for convenience, say long metre); then try to sing all of these hymns to some long metre tune. You will discover that some of the hymns will not fit the tune, although, when scanned by either the classical method or upon Lanier's hypothesis that they are in triple time, all of them contain apparently the same number of lines, the same number of feet in the line, and the same foot structure. What is the trouble? It lies here:— their feet are of different time values, although scanning them failed to reveal that truth. Consider, if you please, these two quotations:—

“Long lines of cliff, breaking, have left a chasm”—
and

“Believe me, love, it was the nightingale
That pierced the fearful hollow of thine ear.”

Both are blank verse; yet, is it not apparent that the first is clearly in common time, while the second is in triple? “Long”

requires about the same length of time for its pronunciation as does "lines;" so also do "have" and "left." They so predominate the rhythm of the line quoted that "of" and "a" are naturally lengthened to make the line maintain a rhythm in common time. In the second selection the unaccented syllables are so much shorter than the accented that the verse swings naturally into triple time. This is equally true of all feet, and it accounts for the variety of effect that may be produced from what is now regarded as one and the same foot. From the trochee may come a light and tripping movement or a languorous, pensive effect. The difference seems to be that in the second instance the unaccented syllable is of greater time value than the unaccented syllable in the first. The first is triple time; the second, common. Now classical scansion takes no note of this; nor do Lanier's musical scansions show the difference between the two; but it can be shown, and clearly, wherever the musical sense of the scanner is sufficiently keen to detect the difference in the two kinds of verse. It should not puzzle us if in the same poem both triple and common time occur; for in numberless musical compositions there are changes of time, as well as of key, as a means of developing themes and of showing changes of mood.

In following the classicists, Lanier makes another mistake. He regards the trochee as rhythmically distinct from the iambus; the dactyl, from the anapest, and, in attempting to make this apparent in his scansion, he leaves his readers under a false impression. The only difference between the iambus and the trochee, between the dactyl and the anapest, is that the trochee and the dactyl open directly upon the arsis, while the iambus and the anapest are introduced upon the thesis, the compensating down beat being supplied at the end of the phrase. To write the iambus and the anapest with the light syllable opening the bar and then to place an accent upon the stressed syllable, results in a wrenching which we certainly do not give the verse when we read it. He did this to make the difference apparent to the eye. The truth is, there is no difference between them, for we see with what readiness the poets introduce one into the scheme of the other without stopping the flow of the verse for a second.

If they were different, this could not be done. These names are no longer useful except to show whether the verse opens upon the arsis or the thesis.

Another error into which we have allowed ourselves to be led is the consideration of metre (the arrangement of feet into lines) as a vital part of rhythm. This is not true. From a mechanical standpoint, the one essential of verse is rhythm, the rhythm of the foot, the rhythm of the phrase. When to this are added the necessary spiritual elements, we have poetry, no matter whether we arrange the words in lines or not. An excellent example of this is shown in the Hebrew poetry of the Old Testament. From the English translation of the King James version, one can see that the spiritual elements necessary to make poetry of the highest order are certainly not wanting; from hearing it read aloud in the original, a musical ear cannot fail to realize the perfection of its rhythm both in foot and phrase.¹ Yet this poetry will not admit of scansion according to the classical method and it certainly is not metrical; but that it is verse, who that has heard it in the Hebrew will deny? It is as essentially poetry as are the poems written after the Jews had come under the influence of the classics and had introduced into their verse both metre and rhyme.

The earliest poets of every nation have written their verse in what we now consider rhythmical prose. Later, a less creative, but more artificial age would decide to arrange verse in lines containing set numbers of syllables. Though there is no proof positive of this statement, it is more than probable that the exceeding regularity of phrasing in lyric poetry must have been the prime factor in bringing this about. Where the pause came, they ended the line. This habit having been once established, it is easy to see how, in poems in which the pause usually came after a definite number of syllables, they would come to write

¹I myself do not know Hebrew, but, through the kindness of Rabbi Edwin N. Calisch, Ph.D., I was able to hear numerous passages read in the Hebrew. Dr. Calisch chose the "Song of Deborah," *Judges* V, the "Song of Moses" at the passage of the Red Sea, *Exodus* XV, and several Psalms, among them the nineteenth, as representative passages of good Hebrew verse.

that number on a line to itself whether the pause came at its close or not. The introduction of rhyme accentuated this pause and helped to establish still more firmly this method of writing verse by adding agreement of sound where before there had been only a pause. Then, too, by writing verse in this way, the eye as well as the ear of the reader was pleased. The use of names for the various metres, while very helpful to us when we wish to state where we find the pauses and the rhymes in lyric poetry, is, nevertheless, often scarcely less than fatal—it helps to blind us to the true rhythmical structure of verse by making us think of the line as a unit and thus introduces into scansion difficulties which when considered rightly simply do not exist. To repeat: In verse there are but three units:—the foot, the phrase, the entire poem, or in some cases the stanza, where the poem is composed of set stanzaic patterns constantly repeated.

The phrase and not the line is the thing to be considered; regard the poem as a rhythmical and not as a metrical unit, and see how smoothly it works out—extra syllables at the end of lines, lines with an extra or lacking syllable at their beginning, pauses within and at the end of lines, all dove-tail into one another and form a perfect whole. Since rhyme is peculiar to verse, there is every reason for conceding that the lines should be written as we now write them; for, in this way we are able to indicate clearly what the tonal structure is; yet we should not forget that from a rhythmical standpoint such an arrangement is purely artificial and arbitrary. Rhyme is merely the embroidery upon the cloth; it beautifies without being warp and woof of the texture.

From the study of Shakespeare one recognizes more clearly than from a study of any other poet that the line is a purely artificial division; for Shakespeare, possessing the rhythmical instinct to a higher degree than any other English poet, and being less influenced by conventionality and classicism than any other of the great poets, did what he felt to be right and natural:—he made the phrase the unit by which he measured. We see the result. Much of the woodenness of many good poets may be attributed to the fact that they forced their phrases into unnatural bounds. Only where the phrases are allowed to run on from line to line can any great degree of beauty or variety of effect be attained.

Strange to say, it appears that up to the present time no writer on the subject of blank verse has noticed that there is a structural, as well as an emotional difference between the lyric and the dramatic forms. One can easily convince himself that difference does exist between the two if he will but take the trouble to examine blank verse thoughtfully. All agree that the song quality is due to the predominance of the emotional element; now, as emotional intensity increases, there is a marked tendency toward regularity of phrasing, until in such purely lyric poems as *Tears, Idle Tears* the phrase groups follow absolutely regular patterns or, as musical terminology would express it, "answer one another." Of ordinary blank verse this is not true. Take Hamlet's soliloquy as an instance. Here the intellectual element is predominant; the phrasing irregular. In *Romeo and Juliet*, on the contrary, the scenes between the lovers are strongly lyric in their character; regularity of phrasing attends this luxuriance of emotion. Is this mechanical difference, then, not a matter of phrasing? If it be due to phrasing, is this fact not a further proof of the rhythmical unity of verse?

If this be true, the present arrangement of blank verse is justifiable only when the verse is lyric, because only in that instance do the phrases tend to end with the line. In the case of purely narrative or dramatic blank verse, however, no such reason can be brought forward to justify the five-foot line. Nevertheless, since blank verse is a crystallized form, it would be foolish to think of writing it otherwise than as we do now; yet in scansion, where it is our business as far as possible to state the true rhythmical structure and not the purely arbitrary arrangement into which the lines have been forced, the continuity of the rhythmical scheme must be clearly shown.

No system of scansion can be invented that will indicate how the verse should be read. In music the score does not give more than the rhythmical and harmonic skeleton upon which the personality of the interpreter is to be superimposed before it can become alive and vital. Compare a piece of music as played by a pianola with the same piece as played by an artist. The pianola gives just what is written on the score, no more, no less, an exact reproduction of the musical scheme. The artist's

rendering of this piece may be difficult to reconcile with that of the pianola; yet, in both instances the interpretations are perfectly rhythmical. Now scansion can give even less than the pianola. It can only indicate to the eye what the structure is, without reproducing a single one of the sounds which it represents. The reader is the artist, and to him we must look for the interpretation. Fundamentally, the reader and the scansion should agree; in detail, they need not. With our present method of scansion the reader and the scansion rarely agree at all. From looking at the scansion, we can form but faint idea of the rhythmical structure of the verse. This should not be. Can it not be remedied by the proper use of the musical system of notation? Yes, if a freer method of scansion be employed than that used by Lanier. Scan with the idea of reproducing the reading; scan so that if the pattern be tapped off, it will be recognizable as the rhythm of the piece under consideration, and not as the cut-and-dried scansion of any other poem of the same metre.

By the use of phrase marks, thermatas, and other signs employed in indicating rhythms musically, we can obtain a system quite as satisfactory as that now used for music. In order to have the scansion show the rhyme scheme, we may even arrange the bars in lines corresponding to those employed in the poem, so long as by arranging them thus we do not lose sight of the fact that this arrangement has nothing whatever to do with the rhythmical structure and that it is employed merely as a concession, in order to make it apparent to the eye that verse possesses a rhyme structure as well as a rhythmical structure.

The three scansions of Hamlet's soliloquy appended will give an idea of what this method aims to accomplish:—

		$\overset{\sim}{-}$ $\overset{\sim}{-}$ $\overset{\sim}{-}$ $\overset{\sim}{-}$ $\overset{\sim}{-}$ $\overset{\sim}{-}$ $\overset{\sim}{-}$ $\overset{\sim}{-}$
		To be, or not to be: that is the question.
	$\frac{3}{8}$	
Sidney Lanier:		To be, or not to be: that is the question.
	$\frac{3}{8}$	

— — — — —
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The slings and
 S. L.: Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The slings and
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer The slings and

— — — — —
 arrows of outrageous fortune; Or to take arms against a sea
 S. L.: arrows of outrageous fortune; Or to take arms against a sea
 arrows of outrageous fortune; Or to take arms against a sea

— — — — —
 of troubles, And by opposing end them.
 S. L.: of troubles, And by opposing end them.
 of troubles, And by opposing end them.

Methods of scansion can, at best, be but little better than wooden; yet, even in wooden moulds, there is a choice to be made.

This paper is presented in the hope that by calling attention to a logical and natural method of scansion it will be helpful to those who are seeking a clearer insight into the real nature of verse. What has been said has not been stated as positive, incontrovertible fact. It is offered merely by way of suggestion, although offered with the conviction that it contains sufficient truth to make it worthy of consideration.

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